

Giving Voice To The Voiceless

An Interview with Lois Pope, Founder, Leaders In Furthering Education (LIFE) and the Lois Pope LIFE Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE One of America's leading philanthropists, Lois Pope is recognized as the country's foremost advocate for veterans and especially disabled veterans, earning the moniker, "The Pope of Disabled Veterans." Combining her unparalleled commitment to disabled veterans with her ardent support of animal welfare, Pope advocated for Congress to pass legislation requiring military working dogs to be brought back to U.S. soil so they can reunite with their human



Lois Pope

soldiers and continue to support and serve each other. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on her mind, and especially how it has affected needy children close to home, Pope made a \$1 million donation to the Palm Beach County Food Bank to endow its meal program for food-insecure kids in the county. Spurred by the heart-wrenching images of Ukrainian refugee children fleeing their homeland, Pope donated \$1 million to Save the Children, the global humanitarian organization working to meet the needs of children and families fleeing the escalating violence in Ukraine. Pope is the driving force behind the establishment of the Lois Pope LIFE Center at the University of Miami School of Medicine, home to the Miami Project/Buoniconti Fund to Cure Paralysis, the world's foremost center for research, treatment, and services for paralysis and other neurological diseases. Pope has given \$12 million to Bascom Palmer Eye Institute to create the Lois Pope Center for Retinal & Macular Degeneration Research at Bascom Palmer's Palm Beach Gardens, Florida campus. Her beneficence has also provided scholarships to low-income teens who aspire to be community medical doctors, a clean water system for a village in Guatemala, support for African women who were victims of female mutilation, and many other initiatives helping the voiceless and vulnerable in society. Moreover, she has donated 17 ambulances to Magen David Adom, Israel's emergency response service. Many organizations have bestowed honors and awards on Pope in recognition of her generosity and humanitarian endeavors including Florida Atlantic University, Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, Ellis Island Foundation, Rabbinical College of America, Magen David Adom, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Albert Einstein College of

Medicine. She was also honored by the Miami Project/Buoniconti Fund to Cure Paralysis with the prestigious Outstanding Humanitarian Award at the 37th Annual Great Sports Legends Dinner in 2022; a Woman of Distinction by Palm Beach Atlantic University; and an inductee into the Golden Baton Society of the Palm Beach Symphony. In recognition of her unparalleled philanthropic endeavors in the region, the Palm Beach County Commissioners issued a proclamation declaring April 4, 2023, as Lois Pope

Day. Earlier in 2023, Families First awarded her The Harriet Goldstein Award, which annually recognizes an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to helping Palm Beach County's most underserved children and families. As American Humane's foremost champion, she was the Inaugural Recipient of the organization's Betty White Legacy Award in 2022. Most recently, Lois Pope was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in Philanthropy by the Executive Women of the Palm Beaches Foundation at its 40th Annual Women In Leadership

Awards luncheon. Pope was named a Daily Point of Light recipient by President George W. Bush, and former Secretary of State Colin Powell appointed her to the board of the Colin Powell Center for Policy Studies at City College of New York (now the Colin Powell Center for Civic and Global Leadership). She also serves or has served on the boards of the Foreign Policy Association, University of Miami, Palm Beach Opera, Armory Arts Center, and Florida Atlantic University.

FOUNDATION BRIEF Since 1993, Leaders in Furthering Education (LIFE) and the Lois Pope LIFE Foundation (life-edu.org) have been dedicated to helping and improving the lives of the voiceless and vulnerable in our society – those who are disadvantaged, marginalized, or forgotten because of disabilities, socio-economic status, neglect, age, abuse, and other barriers. Founded by Lois Pope, one of America's most committed and creative philanthropists and humanitarians, the two nonprofit organizations provide aid, assistance, and awards for disabled veterans, medical research, college scholarships, humanitarian relief, the performing arts, and animal welfare.



Lois Pope at the dedication of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial on October 5, 2014



Lois Pope is congratulated by President Barack Obama for spearheading the creation of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial at its dedication

Will you discuss your life journey and what has made philanthropy so important to you?

I grew up in Philadelphia amid the Great Depression. My grandfather owned a small auto parts store, and my father worked there; my mother was a teacher. Times were tough, and we didn't have much. But I can still vividly recall my mother saving coins in a jar so that when people came to our door looking for a donation to the Salvation Army or other charity, she would have a little change to give them. That life lesson – that we have a responsibility to give to those less fortunate than ourselves, even if we ourselves don't have a lot – laid the foundation for my own philanthropic endeavors.

What was the vision for creating Leaders in Furthering Education (LIFE) and the Lois Pope LIFE Foundation?

My husband Gene (Generoso Pope, the founder and publisher of the *National Inquirer*) and I were committed to helping improve the lives of others and supported quite a few charities. We also supported arts, children's, animal welfare, and health organizations in our community. As but one example, we sponsored the largest Christmas tree in the country, and each year, people in the Palm Beach community and others far and wide would come to celebrate the season. When he passed away, he entrusted me to continue and even further our humanitarian endeavors. So, in 1993, I founded two nonprofit organizations, Leaders in Furthering Education, Inc. (LIFE) and the Lois Pope LIFE Foundation, to give voice to the voiceless and to strengthen the most vulnerable in our society. And for the past 31 years, LIFE's Annual Lady in Red Gala in Palm Beach has raised millions of dollars to help the less fortunate, including those who are disadvantaged or forgotten because of disabilities, socio-economic status, neglect, age, abuse, and other barriers. These

include giving more than 125,000 underserved children a summer camp experience; providing college scholarships to students who aspired to become primary care physicians in their home communities; building a clean water system for a village in Guatemala; and securing freedom for women in Sudan who were being subjected to female mutilation.

For the past two decades, I've focused on four primary areas: hunger in children, medical research, animal health and well-being, and disabled veterans. Regarding the latter, the effort for which I'm proudest and most privileged to have spearheaded is the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington, DC, the nation's first and only permanent public tribute to America's four million-plus disabled veterans. While that was 10 years ago, the idea for the memorial actually dates back to the 1960s, when I was a Broadway performer and was asked to entertain at a holiday benefit for patients at the Rusk Rehabilitation Hospital in New York. I chose to sing the iconic song "Somewhere" from the hit show "West Side Story." As I got to the lyric, "Hold my hand and I'll take you there," I reached down to a man in the front row to grab his hand. He was laying down on a hospital gurney with no hands to hold. I was so overcome I could barely finish the song. After the performance, I went over to talk to him. He shared with me that he had lost his arms from fighting in the early days of the Vietnam conflict. In fact, everyone in the audience was a disabled Vietnam veteran – some had no legs, some were horrifically burned, some had lost their eyesight and hearing. That was my introduction to the lifelong plight of disabled veterans. I promised all of them that if I ever had the resources, I would do something big and memorable for them, to honor their service and sacrifice.

Fast forward to the early 1990s and a visit to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. A cousin had been killed in the war and, like countless others, I went to trace his name on the wall. Suddenly there was a loud bang and a man in a wheelchair became overwhelmed – he was shaking and crying. My thoughts immediately turned to those men at the Rusk hospital and my promise to them. So, I approached a U.S. Park Ranger on the National Mall and said, "I've seen all the monuments and memorials, but I can't find the one for disabled veterans." He told me that there wasn't one, and I boldly and innocently proclaimed, "Then I'll build one."

Boy was I naïve. I had no idea that it would take two decades of bureaucratic red tape, many starts and stops, having to raise more than \$80 million since no federal money could be used to build it, and other obstacles. But it was finally completed and dedicated in a beautiful and moving ceremony presided over by President Obama on October 5, 2014.

You would think I would have stopped there – it was my personal "masterpiece," what I thought would be the culmination of my philanthropic life. But there is always so much more I can be doing. So, I immediately rolled my sleeves back up and got to work. And I'm still going strong.

How has the Foundation evolved, and will you highlight how the Foundation approaches its work and the areas it supports?

As I mentioned, there are four central areas I've been addressing with my philanthropy most recently: hunger in children, medical research, animal health and well-being, and disabled veterans, all with a particular emphasis on Florida, where I live. That's reflected best in my efforts on behalf of American Humane, the Palm Beach County Food Bank, Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, Tri-County Animal Rescue, and Magen David Adom.

For example, I conceived and created my involvement with the Pups4Patriots initiative, within the Lois Pope Center for Military Affairs at American Humane. This program primarily takes dogs from shelters and provides specialized training as certified service dogs. They are then given free of charge to veterans suffering from PTSD and other traumatic brain injuries. And, among other endeavors, I've also been the presenting sponsor of the organization's Annual Hero Dog Awards, and a benefactor of its legendary Red Star mobile hospitals that rescues, shelters, and treats animals that have been injured, lost, or displaced by hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires and other extreme weather incidents or those who have been victimized by animal abuse.

Speaking of vehicles, I've also donated 17 ambulances to Magen David Adom, Israel's national emergency services. I'm extremely proud to be the largest non-Jewish individual donor of these ambulances because the organization's mission transcends religious, ethnic, gender, and other boundaries. Its 35,000 EMTs, paramedics, nurses and other first responder first aid professionals serve Arabs, Israelis, and anyone else who needs treatment during natural disasters, attacks, and medical emergencies. It doesn't matter which God you worship, or if



Lois Pope created Lois' Food4Kids at Palm Beach County Food Bank. The program provides free healthy and nutritious meals and snacks to children throughout the county when they are not in school – weekends, holidays, vacations, and winter, spring and summer breaks.

you even worship. It doesn't matter where you live in the country. Maybe if we all stop determining the worth of an individual by their race, sex, ethnicity, gender preference, religion, age, or socio-economic status, and started realizing that we are all human beings, the world would be a far better, safer, and saner place.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the disease didn't just hit one type of person. No one was immune and far too many died. And far too many had their lives completely upended, including children. In fact, I was spurred into action with the Palm Beach County Food Bank at the outset of the pandemic, when I read how many children were going hungry because their parents lost or were laid off from their jobs and couldn't afford to put enough food on the table. Also, many kids who received free or reduced cost breakfast and lunches in school had no access to those meals because schools were forced to close. So, I gave a sizeable donation to the food bank to create Lois' Food4Kids, which provides backpacks filled with healthy, nutritious meals, food, and snacks to children when they are not in school – on weekends, summers, holidays, vacations, and school breaks. Together, we've distributed many thousands of these backpacks, in addition to doing a special holiday meal give-away each year. Plus, I donated a refrigerated tractor-trailer to allow the food bank to store and distribute more perishable food.

After all, when children are hungry, they can't learn correctly. And if they can't see, they also can't learn. This leads to my newest initiative with Bascom Palmer, where I had previously endowed a Center for Retinal and Macular Degeneration Research in memory of my mother, who suffered for years with macular degeneration that profoundly impacted her life. I also gave a gift to spur the development of the world's first Whole Eye Transplant; the eye

is one of only four organs that has yet to be successfully transplanted, with the others being the ear, spine and brain. So, when I heard from Bascom Palmer how many children had undiagnosed vision problems, I created Lois' Vision4Kids, through which doctors, nurses and eye specialists there conduct free vision screenings for children ages 2-17 from throughout Palm Beach County. If they are determined to need them, they get two pairs of prescription eyeglasses and a pair of sunglasses for free.

Just as there are far too many underserved children, there are also far too many dogs, cats, and other pets who are not being properly served; they need health and medical care, but their human families can't afford it. So, I established the Lois Pope Pet Clinic at Tri-County Animal Rescue as the only such center in Palm Beach, Miami-Dade and Broward counties to provide low-cost and often completely free care to pets whose families don't have the financial resources to access such care, from spaying and neutering to x-rays and other diagnostic tests to surgeries. By the way, Tri-County Animal Rescue is also home to the American Military Hero Dog Monument, which I created to honor those thousands of courageous canines who have served in our nation's Armed Forces dating back before World War I.

You'll notice there is a theme that ties these, and all my philanthropy, together. I do my homework; in other words, I don't just write a check because somebody or some organization asks. I do research into the organizations to make sure they are being run effectively and efficiently and not spending all their donated money on overhead and exorbitant CEO salaries. I also need to learn of their most pressing needs and how any contribution I make is going to make a difference on-the-ground in people's lives. And I get involved – after I donate, I don't just walk away. I meet recipients. I meet those on the front lines

of providing care. I ask questions to see how their lives are being transformed. Remember that my foundations are all about giving voice to the voiceless and strength to the most vulnerable. I can't do that in a vacuum.

What do you feel are the keys to being effective and making an impact in philanthropic work?

Again, it's all about doing your homework. Sure, you can write a check, and thank goodness enough people do just that because when it comes to solving societal problems like childhood hunger and veterans' suicide, nonprofits play a pivotal role. That's their very mission. For me, though, donating money is only part of how to make a real difference. You can also lend your professional expertise and experience, which can be extremely valuable to an organization. You can also give your time and energy, as a board member, as a volunteer, as a mentor. All that requires understanding of what the organization does and what it is striving to accomplish. And that is about doing your homework.

With the impact that you have made and lives that you have touched over the years with your philanthropic work, are you able to reflect and take moments to appreciate what you have accomplished?

Being able to accomplish what I have through my philanthropy brings me great joy and satisfaction. It has been my life's privilege to have the resources and the passion to do this. It inspires me to want to do more, especially when I receive emails and letters from people thanking me for helping them in some way. But I do take time to appreciate my life, my family, and my friends. In fact, many of my friends join me in my philanthropic endeavors. They serve on the boards of my foundations, they support the charities I support – and I support their charities. And we enjoy each other's company. During the pandemic when it became a little safer for in-person get-togethers, I started a weekly and sometimes bi-weekly game night. We play cards, board games, eat, and have a ton of fun. That, and going to the gym almost daily, keeps me youthful and energetic. That's important because I still have lots to do and people to help.

What do you tell young people about the importance of philanthropy and community service?

I remember reading that Warren Buffett once told a journalist that he wanted "to give my children enough money so they would feel they could do anything, but not so much that they could do nothing." When I read this, it quickly reminded me of the life lesson my mother taught me early on about the responsibility we have to help those less fortunate. No act of kindness and compassion, no matter how small, is ever wasted. Plus, philanthropy and community service are beneficial – not just to the recipients of your generosity, but to yourself. There are numerous studies that have found that philanthropy and volunteering make you happier and healthier.

So, I say to young people, find your purpose and pursue it. Yes, you want to do well in life, but it is equally, if not more important, to do good in life. ●